



November 24, 2004

Man admits to student loan fraud, impersonating a military officer

Robert Lawrence, 58, last known to be living in Great Britain, has pleaded guilty in Providence to federal charges of student loan fraud and impersonating a military officer. Lawrence admitted that he pretended to be a retired Army colonel to obtain certain privileges and that he forged documents purporting that he was attending graduate school in England so that he could apply for student loans.

United States Attorney Robert Clark Corrente announced the guilty plea, which Lawrence entered yesterday before U.S. District Court Judge Mary M. Lisi in U.S. District Court Providence. Department of Education officials arrested Lawrence in September at a residence in Barrington where he was waiting to receive an \$18,500 student loan check.

At the plea hearing, Assistant U.S. Attorney Lee H. Vilker said that, had the case gone to trial, the government would have proven that between March 2002 and March 2004, Lawrence fraudulently applied for three federally-insured student loans through the Rhode Island Higher Education Assistance Authority. Twice the applications represented that Lawrence was attending Coventry University in Great Britain, and once he represented that he was attending the University of Central England, Birmingham. The attendance certifications and certifying letters accompanying the applications were

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determined to be forgeries. The loans totaled \$55,000, of which Lawrence received approximately \$37,000.

Student loans for those attending institutions in the United States go directly to the schools. However, a student attending a foreign university receives loan checks personally after filing documents certifying enrollment.

During the investigation, Department of Education special agents determined that Lawrence had been representing himself as a retired Army colonel who had served in Vietnam and with the Special Forces. Lawrence had obtained several official documents supporting those assertions. The documents represented that Lawrence served in the Army from 1964 to 1993, that he had served in a Psychological Operations unit (Psyops), and that he had received three Purple Heart medals and a Silver Star. Using those documents, Lawrence obtained various services and privileges, including Department of Defense health care benefits and a Rhode Island Purple Heart license plate.

Agents determined that the documents about Lawrence's military service were forgeries, that Lawrence was never a colonel, never received a Purple Heart or a Silver Star, and that rather than serving in the military for 29 years, he had served only about three months, in the Air Force between October 1964 and January 1965.

Lawrence pleaded guilty to two charges: obtaining by fraud property insured by the U.S. Department of Education, and falsely pretending to be an officer acting under the authority of the United States and thereby obtaining value. The statutory maximum penalty for the first offense is five years in federal prison and a \$20,000 fine; the statutory maximum penalty for impersonating an officer is three years imprisonment and a

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\$250,000 fine. Federal sentencing is determined on the basis of guidelines that rely on such factors as the specific nature of an offense and a defendant's criminal background, if any.

Lawrence is free on bond pending sentencing, which is scheduled for February 11.

The Department of Education and Department of Defense investigated the case. Assistant U.S. Attorney Vilker is prosecuting it.

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